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ABSTRACT

This paper presents evidence for the positive impact of television on 1,500 children, aged 6 to 16 years old, specifically concerning their conceptions of beauty. The role of television was repeatedly mentioned by the subjects although it was not the primary research goal of the researcher. Examples of children's descriptions of beauty as derived from objects, events, and situations seen on television. It is suggested that television offers children greater variety of opportunities for responding aesthetically than what is available in everyday living. Objects, events, and situations are often described with a sense of wonder, grandeur, and pure enjoyment, suggesting that television may have a positive impact in contrast to the more traditionally exposed negative impact. (NAV)

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Television is Beautiful

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TELEVISION IS BEAUTIFUL

Peter Moran

Television continues to get a bad press. Its harmful effects on the impressionable young, with aggression and violence constantly referred to as the harmful end results of television viewing, are frequently paraded before the reader in the popular daily newspapers. The case is argued very persuasively and strikes a sympathetic ear with many people. However, as I have discovered for myself, the picture is not as black as it is painted. In the course of conducting some research into children's ideas of beauty, I found that television can provide them with quite profound experiences of the beautiful.

Let me explain. My research was intended to investigate children's ideas of beauty. I wanted to find out what children of different ages considered to be beautiful and to see if there was any pattern or sense of development in their ideas. To this end, I questioned one thousand five hundred children between six and sixteen years, living in six counties of Southern England, all attending state schools and residing in rural, urban, coastal and inner city areas. It is not my intention to deal with the results of this investigation here. That will be the subject of another and more substantial article. However, it quickly became apparent during the collection of children's responses that television was a medium or catalyst in their perception of beauty and this is what I think is worth reporting on here. I must stress that I was not looking for television's influence on children's ideas of beauty when I embarked on the research; rather, the role of television in these matters was mentioned by some of the children when questioned.

It became obvious during the investigation that television provided some of the children with memorable experiences, which they responded to and recalled as being beautiful. Carol, aged seven, thought that the most beautiful thing she had ever seen was:

"the London Symphony playing 'Meditation'. I was sitting in front of the telly waiting for it to start. When it did, it was so lovely I got Mum to buy me the 'Wonderful World of Violin', because it was on that record. I think it is the nicest piece of music, because it was so quiet and sweet. The lead violinist was unbelievable. They also played 'Devil's Laughter' by Paganini, which is so fast you would think they would speed it up with special effects. I also got that too."

Children of all ages in the sample provided examples of beautiful experiences provided by television. I will give some examples from different age groups. Samuel, aged eight, said:

"The beautifullest thing I have seen is a volcano on TV, because of its beautiful colours, the lovely orange, yellow and red colour and the big explosion."

Nine-year-old Stephen chose:

"The Palace in India, because, when I saw it on television, it was colourful, very interesting, very artistic."

Another Stephen said:

"The most beautiful thing I've ever seen was a TV programme called Holiday '88. They were out on a boat and were looking at the coral and the yellow and black striped fish."

Eleven-year-old Joanne chose a very popular topic, which enthralled children of every age – birth:

"On television I saw the actual birth of a baby boy. I thought it was a beautiful sight, the sight of new life being born. When I saw it, I was very happy."

Other children described similar scenes from television of the birth of babies and foals. For example, sixteen-year-old Sue said:

"On television once I saw a mare giving birth to a foal. As the foal tried to stand up, it wavered, unsteady and the mother gently supported it with her nose. She licked it clean and the picture of her exploring her new-born infant was beautiful."

Similarly, a fifteen-year-old girl said:

"The most beautiful thing I've ever seen was a television programme where they showed a baby being born and after it did the joy on the mother's face and the relief that the baby was healthy. It showed it all on the mother's face."

Travel programmes provided other children with lasting impressions. Denise, aged twelve, chose:

"... a programme on Mexico. I liked the clothing they wear. The women wear long dresses. They have got all sorts of patterns on them. The men usually wear black trousers with a few studs down the side."

A fourteen-year-old boy said the most beautiful thing he had ever seen was:

"On TV I saw the earth from outer space with the stars round it."

This is just a small selection from the many examples of descriptions of events which children consider to be beautiful and which are provided by television viewing. Other television-inspired choices included customised cars and vans:

"The thing what I saw on telly. It is an old Dodge van that a man painted and he put pictures on it. He put two armchairs in it." (Stephen, aged eight)

Stage settings:

"The most beautiful thing I have ever seen is Michael Jackson's stage setting on television, because everything was dark except for the stage, with different kinds of coloured lights changing all the time – and, when they came out, there was a spotlight for each person." (Nicholas, aged fourteen)

Ballet:

"The most beautiful thing is the ballet on telly, its title is Coppelia ... I've got the record of it. I think it is beautiful. Soon I am going to see it in London." (Jane, aged nine)

Gymnasts:

"The most beautiful thing I ever saw is when we saw the girls do gymnastics. I watch them on television on a Saturday. The way they bend, they bend so easily. They're so light on their feet. Their feet they're always pointed." (Michelle, aged ten)

All these examples came quite spontaneously from the children and they all result from watching television. It can be seen that television viewing provides

opportunities for aesthetic responding. From the few examples which I have quoted, children can be seen responding to beauty in form (gymnasts), colour (volcano) and rhythm (orchestra). These are the qualities which have traditionally made up, as Rothenstein writes, "the syntax and grammar of art". Television also extends the range of visual experiences for children, so that, although they cannot visit India or Australia, they can appreciate the beauty of the Taj Mahal or the coral reef or other natural phenomena like the volcano. The objects, events and situations of beauty which they choose are often described with a sense of wonder, grandeur and pure enjoyment. This is exemplified in the accounts of birth seen on television. This is an event which makes an obvious impact upon the children. There is an emotional involvement apparent which ensures that this experience, like so many others, is individual and memorable. Moreover, it is like all aesthetic responses; it is enjoyed for its own sake. As Shakespeare wrote in 'The Rape of Lucretia':

"Beauty itself does of itself persuade
The eyes of men without an orator".

I have attempted in this article to place before the reader some examples of children's perceptions of beauty deriving from objects, events and situations seen by them on television. I have suggested that in this way television provides children with a greater variety of opportunities for responding aesthetically than might otherwise be possible in their lives. In a small way the evidence presented here may be thought to counterbalance some of the claims made about the negative effects of television viewing.

Reference

Rothenstein J (1962) *British Art since 1900*. Phaidon.